

The Anderson paper reviewed the way that our understanding of the causes and complexities of vulnerability has changed over time and is impacted by various fields of study. It then discussed how development is related to vulnerability, several criteria for vulnerability, and finished by providing a framework from which to consider the question of who is vulnerable and why. Anderson said that, “The purpose of assessing vulnerability is to be able to take appropriate actions to reduce vulnerability before the potential for damage becomes actual.” However, we see time and time again where the knowledge of high vulnerability has no effect on whether or not actions are taken to reduce vulnerability. The reason for this lies in what Anderson calls “costs as cause.” People, from the individual level through the state and international levels, must make choices with limited resources. However, the recent tsunami is a good example of what can happen when these investments are not made. For example, the cost of an early warning system—while not reducing vulnerability to an event per se but certainly reducing vulnerability to death—is surely far eclipsed by the billions of dollars being poured into relief and reconstruction. This view is also contained in the following section, “humans as cause,” in which she writes “humans make themselves—or, quite often, others—vulnerable.” This is a powerful thought, because the converse is also true. Not only do humans create vulnerability for others, but some humans also have the ability to reduce the vulnerability of others. It was very interesting to read through the ways that development can increase vulnerability, and reminds us to be cautious about assuming that development does reduce the vulnerability of everyone, but as that development reduces poverty for everyone. Is this the same Mary Anderson who wrote “Do No Harm”? If so, it certainly underscores the complexities involved in following this edict.

Morrow discusses who is most vulnerable to storms, focusing particularly on the United States. She identifies those groups within the U.S. who are more likely to be negatively affected by storms such as the hurricanes that frequently occur in the south. A point of particular interest to me within this article is regarding the vulnerability of renters (of homes or apartments) because they have little or no say as to whether their homes have any disaster prevention mechanisms in place beyond what is required by law. She points out that government subsidized housing in particular often lacks any prevention measures, but that many residents of these buildings lack the ability to find housing after an emergency because of limited resources, increasingly the probability that the former residence will be homeless. The discrimination and/or differential treatment—unintentional or otherwise—facing minorities and women in disasters is also outlined. Vulnerability mapping is one way to increase our understanding on who needs additional help in disasters, but involving the vulnerable in the discussion and process of developing disaster preparedness measures is essential.

The Peacock and Ragsdale article, which takes a socio-political ecology approach, points out a problem that is common to most emergencies—coordination. They show how the U.S. government takes a “market” approach to disaster recovery, which can disadvantage the poor and is ineffectual when goods are scarce or when people lack adequate insurance coverage. Coordination and disaster recovery often falls to NGOs and via markets rather than the government and is further compounded by the problem of competition among all groups.